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PERIODIC REPORT ON EVALUATION

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Annex - Review of the PRSD experience

1. This report on UNFPA evaluation activities in 1992 and 1993 has been prepared for the information of the Executive Board in response to Governing Council decisions 82/20 I and 90/35 A, which requested the Executive Director to continue to make biennial reports on evaluation to the Council. The review of the Fund's programme review and strategy development (PRSD) exercise provided in the Annex to this report has been prepared in response to Council decision 92/32 A. No decision is requested of the Board.

A. Project evaluations

2. In addition to day-to-day monitoring of the implementation of projects and the preparation of Annual Project Reports, evaluations are frequently conducted in the course of project implementation as well as upon completion of project activities. The number of project evaluations undertaken during the period under review remained roughly the same as in the previous biennium -- 220 compared to 230. This is a clear indication that the Fund's Guidelines for Project Formulation and Appraisal, which require a monitoring and evaluation component to be built into all projects and emphasize the use of evaluation results in subsequent project cycles, are having the desired impact.

3. Consonant with increasing decentralization of programme functions, most evaluations of country projects are initiated and implemented in the field. This has the advantage that those most directly concerned with the formulation and appraisal of projects have immediate and ready access to evaluation results and that such results will be used to improve project implementation. At the same time, however, because project evaluation reports are not always transmitted to headquarters, the opportunity for synthesizing and disseminating lessons learned is often missed. Efforts to address this situation continue to be made, particularly in connection with the establishment of a redesigned evaluation database, which is discussed in greater detail below.

4. Review of the project evaluation reports available at headquarters indicate that the quality of evaluations, though inconsistent, is generally quite good. It is also notable that national experts and institutions are becoming increasingly involved as evaluators. Members of the UNFPA Country Support Teams (CSTs) are also called upon to conduct project evaluations, although their increasing inputs to project design and technical backstopping could create a conflict of interest in situations where independent assessments are called for.

5. A very common finding in project evaluations is that, despite the inclusion of an evaluation component in each project, the design of most projects was such that meaningful evaluation, particularly of substantive achievements, was rather difficult. More often than not, although projects had a separate budget line for evaluation activities, their strategies and work plans did not include elements that would facilitate such an exercise. To address this shortcoming, in August 1993 the Fund prepared a checklist to ensure that the evaluation needs of a project are addressed adequately in the project design. The checklist, which is intended primarily for use during project appraisal, outlines a set of considerations that should be taken into account in the projects that have built-in evaluation components. The issues raised are generic to evaluation needs and should be applicable to projects in any programme area. These refer to the need, inter alia, to establish a clear definition of the purpose(s) of proposed evaluation(s), to devise measurable indicators, and to identify the methodologies and data to be used. In this connection, and in order to facilitate the establishment of baseline data for project design and evaluation, in November 1993, the Executive Director instructed all UNFPA field offices to maintain up-to-date information on a comprehensive set of indicators of population issues in their respective countries.

B. Thematic evaluations

6. In accordance with the biennial work programme for thematic evaluations, UNFPA conducted a series of evaluations of programmes in various substantive areas. These included information, education and

communication (IEC) strategies in UNFPA-assisted projects in support of family planning programmes; income-generating activities for women within the context of women, population and development activities; and the quality of services in family planning programmes. The main findings, conclusions and recommendations of these thematic evaluations are available in reports published by UNFPA. In addition, another thematic evaluation on local production of contraceptives is in process and should be completed by spring 1994.

7. Desk reviews of UNFPA-assisted programmes were conducted in preparation for two other thematic evaluations -- one on community participation in the implementation of family planning programmes; the other on information and service programmes for adolescents. These desk reviews provided preliminary analyses of UNFPA experience in these programme areas and highlighted issues to be considered in the design of the eventual thematic evaluation.

8. A set of procedures for UNFPA thematic evaluations has been prepared and will be disseminated in English, French and Spanish. These procedures clarify the role and expected contribution of all those involved in such evaluations.

C. PRSD exercises

9. The PRSD exercise continues to serve as the principal programme development tool for country programming. Compared with the previous biennium, many fewer PRSDs were conducted. In 1992, a total of 14 PRSD missions took place -- 9 in Africa (Burundi, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Madagascar, Sao Tome and Principe, and Uganda); 3 in Asia and the Pacific (Lao People's Democratic Republic, Pakistan, and Thailand); and 2 in Latin America and the Caribbean (Guatemala and Nicaragua). In 1993, 5 PRSD missions were fielded -- 2 in Africa (Chad and Zambia) and 3 in Asia and the Pacific (Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, and the Philippines).

10. The sharp decrease in the number of PRSD exercises conducted is due principally to the fact that most countries in which there are UNFPA-assisted programmes have already undergone one such exercise. For this reason, and because the PRSD guidelines have had a period of full implementation, UNFPA conducted two reviews in 1993 of different aspects of the PRSD approach -- one to assess the quality of PRSD reports and the relevance of the findings of the PRSD exercise to the subsequent UNFPA-assisted country programme; the other to examine the Fund's experience with the PRSD process in order to identify measures to improve future such exercises. The findings of these two reviews are summarized in the Annex to this report.

D. Feedback and use of evaluation results

11. As noted in previous reports to the Governing Council on evaluation activities, the UNFPA Programme Committee and Project Review Committee require that proposals of new programmes and projects for UNFPA support document the use of evaluations in their preparation. Specifically, each proposal for a new country programme must be accompanied by the relevant PRSD report. Thus, the soundness and coherence of each proposed programme is assessed within the context of the findings and recommendations of the PRSD exercise. In addition, the findings and recommendations of all mid-term reviews of country programmes and of thematic evaluations are also presented to the Programme Committee for its review and decision in regard to follow-up action.

12. As mentioned above, since almost all project evaluations are initiated and implemented through field offices, the feedback and use of evaluation results in subsequent project cycles are practically assured. At the headquarters level, projects are presented for review, either for funding or monitoring purposes, by the Project

Review Committee, which draws regularly on knowledge derived from past evaluations and assessments of projects in the relevant sector.

13. The relevant findings of thematic evaluations are fed into the programming process through various means, including the wide dissemination of reports and discussions in the aforementioned Committees. With specific reference to recent exercises, the findings of case studies conducted in Zambia in relation to the thematic evaluation of IEC strategies in support of family planning constituted a major input into the background paper for the subsequent PRSD mission to that country. The findings of this thematic evaluation also helped clarify the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches in the IEC sector, noting in particular the institutional requirements for each approach.

14. The thematic evaluation of income-generating activities for women highlighted the prerequisites for viable, effective projects in this area, delineating in particular specific considerations in the appraisal of projects with a credit component. The evaluation concluded that when project inputs reached women and when accessible MCH/FP services were available, the projects appeared to contribute both to increases in income and to changes in reproductive behaviour. In response to the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, UNFPA included a special section on economic activities in its guidelines for UNFPA support of programmes in the area of women, population and development.

15. The findings of the thematic evaluation of the quality of family planning services pointed to the need for more focused attention to quality aspects in project design and monitoring, including choice of contraceptive method, technical competence of health providers, interaction between service provider and clients, mechanisms to encourage continuation of contraceptive use, and appropriateness and acceptability of services. As a result, UNFPA will be consulting with concerned organizations that support and/or deliver family planning services in order to reach agreement on key indicators to be used for assessing the quality of family planning services and to devise a common approach to programming future interventions and monitoring their effectiveness.

16. The challenge ahead is to continue to broaden the basis for feedback to promote cross-fertilization among projects and to establish a comprehensive institutional memory of lessons learned. UNFPA has long had a computerized lessons-learned database, which was established with very modest resources when the technology was still in its embryonic stage. With the increasing volume of data becoming available as built-in evaluations become a regular feature of UNFPA-assisted projects and with developments in office automation at UNFPA, there is a need for a database system that is more advanced, more accessible and more user-friendly.

17. Drawing on the expertise of its in-house management information specialists, UNFPA identified a software package that could accommodate the Fund's growing needs for a redesigned evaluation database. The main objectives of this database are to create an institutional memory of evaluation findings; promote the dissemination and use of evaluation findings; and enable UNFPA to conduct, periodically, trend analyses of issues and problems in project design as well as performance.

18. In designing the new database, particular care was taken to consult with the ultimate users of the system, namely, the technical as well as programme staff. The database will organize the findings of evaluation reports according to issues related to project design, implementation and performance aspects and highlight women's concerns, sustainability of project achievements and lessons learned. During the initial phases of setting up the system, UNFPA will focus on entering data from reports of evaluations already conducted. In order to meet the objectives of the system, however, it will be essential to ensure that evaluation reports are routinely transmitted to headquarters for entry into the system.

19. Another initiative taken to promote the use of the evaluation results of UNFPA-supported projects and programmes was the publication of a new bulletin entitled Evaluation Findings. This publication, issued periodically since mid-1993, provides a synopsis of the findings and lessons learned from both thematic and project/programme evaluations. It is intended to highlight and encapsulate the key issues identified in evaluations in order to strengthen and expedite the feedback process. To date, four issues have been disseminated to UNFPA field and headquarters staff, as well as to the members of the UNFPA Country Support Teams and the Fund's collaborating agencies. Of these, three summarized the findings of recent thematic evaluations and one highlighted common issues in training projects as derived from a desk review of project evaluation reports.

E. Future plans

20. The major undertaking in the immediate future is undoubtedly the independent evaluation of UNFPA arrangements for providing technical support services (TSS). The Governing Council, in its decision 91/37 approving the Executive Director's proposals for successor arrangements for agency support costs, requested that UNFPA arrange for an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of these arrangements and report thereon to the Council in 1995.

21. The objective of the evaluation is to assess the Fund's experiences in implementing the TSS arrangements. In view of the fact that these arrangements have been in effect only since 1992, the evaluation should be viewed as an interim assessment of an evolving system. Its focus will be on analysing the effectiveness of the mechanisms and procedures established to make the TSS system operational in order to make recommendations to improve it. UNFPA will present the findings and recommendations of the evaluation to the Executive Board in 1995, as requested in paragraph 14 of decision 91/37.

22. In the biennium 1994-1995, work will continue on two thematic evaluations for which desk reviews are in process. The first of these refers to information and service programmes for adolescents. Over 70 projects have been identified that either target adolescents exclusively or have components that target them. On the basis of the desk review, some projects will be selected for more in-depth analysis as case studies in countries that have serious teen-age/adolescent pregnancy problems.

23. The other desk review -- of community participation in family planning programmes -- is focusing on the promotion and delivery of services. From an initial sample of over 60 projects, 15 have been selected for more in-depth review. In all of these, community participation was perceived as an implementation strategy rather than as a goal in itself; in most instances the objective was to expand the coverage of service delivery. Initial findings have identified a number of factors that have either hampered or enhanced the effectiveness of community-based approaches.

24. A related topic that will be examined through comparative analysis is that of the use of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) in the delivery of family planning services. UNFPA has for many years assisted governments in the use of TBAs in promoting family planning. While there is general appreciation of the unique contribution that TBAs can make towards expanding the coverage of family planning, particularly through overcoming cultural and ethnic barriers, there is a need to take stock of how well the support being provided to TBAs is enabling them to perform their intended role and of how their performance is being monitored. This evaluation is expected to provide lessons learned to guide future programmes involving TBAs, in due recognition of the increased emphasis being placed on the quality of family planning services.

25. As UNFPA continues its efforts to strengthen programme development through the PRSD process, it will pay particular attention to the evaluation component in that process. The focus of attention has been on evaluations at the project level -- the level at which the feedback and use of evaluation results have also taken place. The lessons learned, however, are not regularly analysed at the programme level and therefore

do not necessarily provide a comprehensive assessment of programme performance. To address this, the country programme mid-term review mechanism needs to be strengthened. More important, as most countries have already undergone a PRSD exercise and many of them are about to start a second post-PRSD programme cycle, there is an immediate need to validate the relevance of the strategies adopted as well as evaluate the performance of measures taken to implement them. In sum, more attention needs to be paid to highlight the programme evaluation aspect in the programming process.

26. Evaluations of country programmes must be conducted on a regular basis as an integral part of the programming process in order to assess performance from substantive as well as managerial/operational perspectives. Such assessments are critical to efforts to improve the quality of programmes and to ensure accountability in a climate of increasing decentralization. The process and methodology of evaluation need to be better defined in order to optimize inputs from programme, technical and evaluation staff as well as from members of CSTs. As a start, in November 1993, the Executive Director instructed all UNFPA Representatives and Country Directors to ensure that quantifiable goals are formulated for all ongoing, as well as new, country programmes.

27. While country programme evaluations provide the opportunity to take stock at specific points in time, the process of continuous monitoring is essential for maintaining the momentum and integrity of implementation. In order to strengthen monitoring of programme performance, UNFPA plans to define and develop a management information system (MIS) that would be an integral part of each country programme. Such a system would enable both the concerned government and UNFPA to have regular feedback on the process of programme implementation. It would also fill the current gap in quantitative data for reviews and evaluations at both project as well as programme levels.

ANNEX

REVIEW OF THE PRSD EXPERIENCE

1. In 1993, UNFPA undertook two reviews of its experience with the PRSD exercise. One review analysed the quality of PRSD reports and examined the extent to which UNFPA-assisted programmes reflected the findings and recommendations of the PRSD exercise. The other review focused on the PRSD process as a whole, from the preparatory through follow-up phases. The objective of both reviews was to identify areas of weakness so that steps could be taken to strengthen the effectiveness of the exercise both as a programming tool and as a means of improving the quality of UNFPA assistance.

2. The review of 29 PRSD reports (covering the period 1989-1992) indicated that the overall quality of the reports had improved over time. The reports prepared in 1992 were generally more comprehensive in their analysis and provided clearer strategic guidance than those prepared in earlier years. Still, a number of the reports failed to define clear national and sectoral strategies or to place the recommended strategies in the appropriate sequence or proper context within the national population programme. Others confused sectoral strategies with objectives and activities, which resulted in recommendations that were too detailed and project-specific.

3. The review found that the objectives and strategies of the corresponding UNFPA country programmes were clearly based on the PRSD recommendations. These recommendations were often so broadly stated, however, that most interventions in UNFPA's major programme areas could have been rationalized. Moreover, although the recommendations generally were specific to the needs of the country reviewed, they often were not prioritized. This made it difficult to pinpoint what could reasonably be achieved in a 5- or 10-year period. Part of the problem can be traced to weak analyses of national capacities in various sectors, the lack of critical assessment of key issues in implementing population programmes, and the failure to cast PRSD findings in the overall national development context.

4. The review of the PRSD process as a whole found that the exercises had yielded a wealth of data, enhanced the understanding of the population dynamics in the countries reviewed, and facilitated the future planning, design and implementation of national population programmes. It was often difficult, however, to correlate the proposed interventions and allocation of resources by sector with the recommendations of the PRSD mission.

5. Overall, the approach to the PRSD exercise was found, in general, to be too mission-driven. Much energy and attention were focused on activities specific to organizing and conducting the PRSD mission, but not enough on critical preparatory and follow-up activities. As a result, gaps in background data and documentation often hampered both programme analysis and strategy development. Moreover, the missions often seemed to be headquarters-imposed because of a lack of clarity regarding the role of the Government and of the UNFPA field office.

6. As most developing countries have already undergone a PRSD exercise and the first round of post-PRSD country programmes have come to an end, there is a need to assess the relevance of the strategies adopted and also to evaluate programme performance. In some instances, an update of the PRSD may be needed as new information becomes available or circumstances change substantially in one or more programme sectors. In the rare case where the initial PRSD exercise no longer appears to be applicable due to major changes in circumstances, UNFPA may consider conducting a second full-fledged PRSD exercise.

7. The next phase of the programme development process should begin with the mid-term review of the country programme, at which time implementation issues are examined. In this connection, it is important

to draw a clear distinction between those issues that are strategic and substantive in nature and those that are operational and managerial in nature. Well-conducted mid-term reviews, therefore, should provide indications of how programme performance should be evaluated, as well as what actions are needed to develop the next programme.

8. The two reviews conducted by UNFPA show the PRSD exercise to be a powerful approach to population programming. UNFPA has learned a number of lessons concerning both the organizational as well as substantive aspects of this approach. There is already some evidence that the lessons learned are being applied. The Fund recognizes, however, that the full potential of the approach has not yet been realized. A case in point is the fact that the PRSD reports, many of which provide high-quality country analyses, are still used primarily and, in most cases, exclusively for UNFPA programming. This may be due in part to the fact that the reports have not provided estimates of what it would cost to implement the PRSD recommendations.

9. The review and assessment of programme strategies and the evaluation of programme performance are part of a continuum to enhance programme impact and efficiency. They are also at the core of the PRSD concept, which needs to be appreciated as an ongoing process of regular substantive monitoring. Among the measures needed to strengthen that process are to generate and maintain population programme data on a country-by-country basis; clearly define the roles and responsibilities of concerned parties; clearly delineate the various phases in the programming process; and refine the tools used in programming and evaluation.